

Courtesy of The Kalamazoo Gazette

Unified Barry County court system wins kudos

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After serving as a guinea pig in an experimental court study to combine aspects of district, circuit and probate courts, the new unified Barry County court system has been declared a success by both local and state officials.

According to a report issued by the state last fall, the average time in Barry County for felony cases to move from an arrest to a plea has been reduced by at least half since the project's implementation in 1996.

That's despite the fact that the numbers of cases filed in Circuit Court grew significantly over the

same time period.

"It's allowed us to hear all types of cases in a timely manner," Barry County Circuit Judge James Fisher said. "We're processing cases much more quickly than we were seven years ago."

Over the course of the project, according to the report, the average time for felony cases in Barry County to move from an arrest to a plea fell from three months to four to six weeks. The caseload, over about the same period, increased from around 800 to 1,600.

The number of pending cases dropped as well, from 553 in 1993 to 309 in 2000.

Because of the project's success

in Barry and other counties, the Michigan Supreme Court recommended to the Legislature laws that give individual counties control over how much or how little they choose to unify their systems.

"We don't want to force anyone," said Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Maura Corrigan, acknowledging that some will be reluctant to change. "We want to this thing to catch fire."

In Barry County, Fisher said, the court will continue to operate under a unified system.

While he may have a "Circuit Court" title, Fisher is not limited just to Circuit Court matters, which is one of the key changes implemented by the project in 1996.

Under a unified system, circuit judges can hear district matters, district judges can hear probate matters, etc.

"What this allows you do to is move judges around according to changes in the workload," Fisher said. "In a county like mine, if you only have one circuit judge and he's swamped with a big trial, you can shift."

But what about in a county like Kalamazoo, where four circuit judges and seven district judges handle a much larger criminal caseload?

Judge Vincent Westra, Kalamazoo County's chief district judge, said the county has been looking at combining some administrative

matters — jury pool, for example, might no longer be divided between district and circuit courts — but judges would not be likely to drop their specific titles and specialized duties in the near future.

Matters handled in the different courts are too specialized to easily allow judges to constantly switch back and forth, Westra said.

"If you asked me (as a district judge) to hold a mental-health hearing (in probate court), I'd be pulling my hair out," he said.

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